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ABSTRACT

The author emphasizes the importance of education for parenthood and recommends such education for both adolescents and adults. In recent years, parenthood education for teenagers has been emphasized at the national level by the Children's Bureau, Office of Child Development, HEW. However, this emphasis is declining and parent education is suffering the effects of a bandwagon approach. The declining emphasis on parenthood education coincides with the increasing need of parents for supportive information and assistance in child rearing. This is due to the increasing complexity of adult roles and the variety of influences from the larger society. The negative effects of children's television viewing are pervasive and require parental guidance. In conclusion, the author advocates an activist approach to generating parent education programs and views the scarce support for such programs as indicative of a society's lack of concern with human values. (Author/DOW)

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If you think for one minute you can understand teenagers, you have it timed about right.

PARENT EDUCATION: BANDWAGON - BASTARD or BONAFIDE

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It seems important to define our terms. The dictionary says: Bandwagon -- movement that attracts open support or approval because it seems to be winning or gaining popularity; bastard -- illegitimate; of an inferior or non-typical kind, size or form; and bonafide -- authentic, genuine, real, an agreement made in good faith. After jokingly stating the title, I wished I might change the word "or" to "and," because the compilation of much evidence suggests that it is indeed all three, but unfortunately, more bandwagon and bastard than bonafide.

Taking a look into each: Bandwagon -- one only has to look at the organizations and groups who took "education for parenthood" as a priority in 1975, 1976 and 1977, but have not listed it so for 1977-78 and have either dispensed with it all together or have listed it as a small part of another program. A look at a recent document from the HEW National Center of Child Advocacy supports the bandwagon approach to parent education. Their organizations for one to three years placed first priority on education for parents (and there are some 17 other programs that I could describe at length and many others that I know of that have come and gone). I'll read from it...

National Center for Child Advocacy lists Education for Parenthood as its primary focus. Education for parenthood is a unique national program sponsored by the Children's Bureau, Office of Child Development, U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The major purpose of the program is to provide teenagers with the opportunity to foster more positive attitudes about children and parenting and to increase their knowledge and skills along the following dimensions:

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

The course of child development

The social, medical and emotional needs of children

The family's role in child development and socialization

The important factors in prenatal care and the early months of infancy

Child care career possibilities and requirements

Seven youth-serving organizations participated in the program, ending their efforts in June 1976. They are:

Boys' Clubs of America. The major component of the Boys' Clubs of America's Education for Parenthood Program is called HELP-A-KID (HAK). The primary goals of the HAK program are to enhance teenagers' knowledge of themselves; to provide older youth with an understanding of others, especially younger children; to increase young people's awareness of the importance of

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family influence; to help adolescents gain a better understanding of child development; and to provide an opportunity to explore careers related to working with children.

The Boy Scouts of America. Program emphasis for the Boy Scouts' Exploring Division was on careers in child care areas. Exploring Childhood Posts are being established at schools, child care agencies, mental health facilities and similar organizations where Explorers are given the opportunity to observe and work with child care professionals. In this way, Explorers are given field-work experience with a wide variety of children, including the multiple handicapped.

4-H Clubs. The 4-H Clubs' Education for Parenthood program is utilizing a variety of teaching approaches in communicating parenting skills and concepts to teenagers. For example, in one program teenagers are trained to lead peer groups in the exploration of parenting concepts.

Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. The overall goal of the Girl Scouts' Education for Parenthood program is to stimulate and increase, on a nationwide basis, youth participation in program activities which enhance individual capabilities for understanding, supporting, caring for, and enriching the lives of the young.

National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers had as a primary goal an Education for Parenthood program to provide the opportunity for low-income youth to explore a variety of adult roles related to family life and to acquire the problem-solving skills and knowledge needed to function successfully in those roles. The Education for Parenthood program is located in the inner cities of several large metropolitan areas across the United States. The curriculum is designed for groups of 25 to 35 participants and emphasizes sex education, child development and child care.

For the Salvation Army, the main focus of Education for Parenthood programs was to assist teenagers in making informed decisions about becoming parents themselves by fostering their self-understanding and their understanding of the responsibilities and obligations of parenthood. Another important thrust is the enhancement of interests and the development of skills in the child care field among the participants.

The Save the Children Federation Education for Parenthood program believed that parenting was a complex and demanding task, and that our society, for a variety of reasons, fails to provide young people with sufficient knowledge of and experience with many of the requisite skills that parenting requires. Therefore, their program was designed to provide culturally and economically disadvantaged Appalachian teenagers the opportunity to develop parenting skills and parenting knowledge through the principle of "learning by doing." Through field experience parenting skills and knowledge are acquired in day care and preschool centers, through field placement with small children on a one-to-one basis, and by an extended involvement as teachers and friends with young children.

Behavior Associates, working closely with the Office of Child Development in the seven national youth-serving organizations, were to provide a comprehensive and meaningful evaluation of the Education for Parenthood project. The major thrust of the evaluation is to provide evaluative information that will be useful in future program planning and implementation. The hope is to eventually develop effective Education for Parenthood models which can easily

be replicated by others. To this end, a listing of effective materials and training techniques will be available from the Office of Child Development in the Fall of 1977.

What caused these and many, many others to jump off the Parent Education bandwagon?

Supportive evidence of the bastardly treatment of parent education is easily available -- not seen as "an active area, a discipline, a field worthy of research and follow-up" -- we see education for parenthood, alternatively described as synonymous with "child development," child care, discipline and guidance, preschool education and marriage education. Plagued with approaches from P-E-T to T-E-T to Y-E-T, one parent told me recently she would be glad when W-E-T came in because potty training was uppermost in her mind!

The surveys which Dick Kerckhoff has done in high schools and that I have done in colleges and universities indicate that primarily parent education is an illegitimate offspring of child development and child care, rather than the academic umbrella over marriage education and child development education and based upon a thorough understanding of child growth and development.

If we look at bonafide -- that genuine, authentic content area worthy of study, research and training -- just what is it? I believe that parent education is purposive training for the parental role and for learning appropriate responses to young children as they grow and develop. Much research supports the fact that the parent-child relationship is of infinite significance in the lives of both, but particularly in the life of the child. Children can no longer learn all the dimensions of this role only from the parent model. For this reason it has become necessary for schools and community organizations to respond to this need and help prepare individuals for all aspects of parenting. In no profession does one attempt to do a job well without learning the skills necessary to the success of the job, and so for parenthood can these varied skills be taught.

Education for parenthood is justified today because individuals need a great deal of help in order to fulfill their roles as parents and maintain the family as a vital basic unit in America, and also because children desperately need a counter-balancing agent against the large amount of societal in-put, mainly through the mass media, which negates the nurturing, understanding, empathic out-put required for parenting. The educational system in the United States has only recently begun to recognize its obligations to prepare young people for their parenthood roles as partial prevention for the kind of frustration that often culminates in child abuse and child negelct.

In the book EDUCATION FOR PARENTING: A PREVENTIVE APPROACH TO CHILD NEGELECT AND ABUSE, Robert P. Boger of Michigan State University, and Harriet K. Light of North Dakota State University, state: "From our perspective child abuse is but one manifestation or symptom of a dysfunctional family system. It is a severe indication that the parenting role or function of the family is not working. Overt child abuse is only the most obvious and severe tip of the iceberg of actual inappropriate child rearing behavior."

W. Stanley Kruger, in an article "Teaching Parenthood," states: "Of all the responsibilities people are called upon to undertake in life, it is hard to imagine one more perplexing and more demanding -- a more rigorous test of

wisdom and patience and judgment under fire -- than that of being a parent. Nor one for which most people are so poorly prepared."

"Moreover, it is probably fair to say that being a good mother or father is more difficult today than it was 50 years ago, and more difficult still than 100 years ago. Family life has increasingly become less intimate, less organized, less bound by precepts and standards and the iron command of parents over children. Sons and daughters and fathers and mothers are not impelled to spend most of their time together, working as a team to keep the household going. Though the children of those previous generations may have found the situation painfully confining, they did get a solid grounding in what being a father or a mother was all about. No longer, or at least not as universally. When it comes to learning what it takes to be a good parent, the home is a decreasingly active, albeit still primary source of instruction. Nor has the church or any other private organization been able to take up the slack. More and more, the job of reinforcing the home in this sensitive area is becoming the responsibility of the schools."

I agree with the former statement of Mr. Kruger's, and I would give high priority to education for parenthood -- a course in parent education for every parent-to-be or present parent and a course in child development for every other adult member of society, including the secretary in an office building, the president of a university, the chairman of the National Television Board, and even the President of the United States. I believe this is important because every child's development is touched often by all of society's adults.

And, as adults, I feel it is our responsibility to see that children get good education for parenthood; we absolutely should require that everyone of our school boards make education for parenthood a requirement of every boy and girl in junior high and high school, and when possible, require a beginning course in every elementary school. Such courses should include basic child development, material on the effect of different marriage relationships on child rearing, and the effect of children on the marital relationship.

The courses should include material on effective discipline and guidance (as separate from knowledge of child development), the meaning of children's play, good nutrition and physical care, how to spot problems and enhance potential, and a large dose of how to effectively manage a home, organize it, run it and utilize energy and resources to advantage. They should further include how to select good child care when both parents work, how to give adequate sex education, how to give children the best chance for school success, and where to locate resources that help families in their communities.

Sensing the need for this kind of education, parents and children together in some communities have organized weekly workshops and study groups, and the results have been improved parent-child relationships, concern on the part of teenagers for younger children in the community, and more satisfying marital relationships.

There are many areas where combined home-school efforts would pay off tremendously:

1. The area of guidance and discipline -- <u>why</u> are we always groping for the "right" method -- should we spank -- punish -- reward? Why couldn't home and school enter this important job together so that children had a lot more consistency in their lives?

2. The area of home-school influence. One might ask, "Is there any (home-school) any more?" Since the advent of TV, mounting statistics about children's hours of viewing indicate that it may already be nearly too late for at least children between 2 and 10 may get more of the value and education influences from the little box than they do from teachers or parents, especially since both parents are more and more working outside the home.

As debates rage about the good and bad effects of TV on children, a new statistic is out indicating that by the time a child finishes high school, he will have had 12,000 hours of schooling and 16,500 hours of TV. Assuming that a child eats, sleeps, bathes and does a very few other things, what time is left for parent-child relationships? Or teacher-child relationships?

We can't consider parent education without the potential effects of TV on children and on parenting. Needless to say, not every child watches TV this much; some watch less, but, of course, some watch more, and the effects of mass media are more widespread than any of us ever dreamed possible. I simply cannot imagine the large group of American parents who are willing for their children to gain values, information and role-models from a little box which gives information and facts planned by individuals who, for the most part, have little or no understanding of children, family life, and community life in our country today. An afternoon of soap operas alone would have most of us taking an overdose of sleeping pills if we thought this were an adequate portrayal of most of human life that goes on around us today. Each parent needs to become a researcher, to learn what programs his youngsters watch, what values are being stressed, and at the very least, supervise and interact with children about what they are seeing.

I am concerned about several trends which I see in my professional role. Many children today have greatly distorted views of health; they honestly believe that headaches, stomach upsets, constipation, irregularity, tension and insomnia are normal, natural conditions of life most of the time, and they also honestly believe that remedies for these conditions must be well stocked in every household. Coupled with the idea that our teeth are decaying rapidly, we usually have underarm and other body odors, our feet are subject to incurable athlete's foot, our hair is losing its protein by the minute, we portray to our children that to grow up is to rapidly decay, clog up, and become rather stinky individuals.

A survey asked several children, "What will being grown-up be like?" The answers were to the effect that they would feel "poorly" as one youngster put it, "most of the time," and that they would "need a lot of money for medicines and soaps to wash their clothes."

Tired, headachy adults do not give children a positive view of the worth of growing up. A recent article commenting on a foreigner's views while visiting our country and watching TV states it well. "Nowhere," he declares, "is the average citizen asked more frequently to examine himself for colds, neuralgia, backache, underarm odor, headaches, constipation, blackheads, neuritis, bursitis, arthritis, sinusitis, indigestion, stomach trouble, piles, eczema, athlete's foot -- all the troubles for which medicines are available at the drug store. I came over to your country a well man," he explains. "After one week of listening to your television commercials, I feel very ill."

The school could play a very special role in helping parents and children better understand each other and, thereby, bridge the ever-present generation

gap. Clark Vincent's now popular "Open Letter to the 'Caught Generation'" in The Family Coordinator says:

> "For a quarter of a century, we have witnessed an unprecedented empathy for the problems, anxieties and identity quests of youth. Writings and podium pronouncements have pressured, cajoled and scolded parents to listen to, understand and communicate with their teenagers. Absent and seldom noted as missing have been those printed and spoken words which might have alerted youth to the necessity of reciprocity in communication. If it has been unpopular to remind youth of their responsibility to listen to and communicate with adults, it has been virtually blasphemous to suggest that teenagers be aware of, even if they cannot empathize with, the identity struggles and anxieties of their parents."

The entire field of community action and parent-teacher-child advocacy is one of the most important for joint efforts. When you ask the really big, important question, "who cares enough about parenthood, teachers and schools, and children in our country to have their welfare always first as evidenced by money and funding, top physical facilities and good education programs, what answer is available," can you tell me why any parent, any teacher, any child should not have available easily anything that is needed to promote productivity, sound mental health, good education, and a capacity for helping to improve life for all. I can't think of one, good, valid reason for answering that question "yes." Teachers, parents and children should be the nation's number one top priority at all times if we really want to educate well and grow up well -- if we really want the by-products of compassion, empathy, concern of all individuals for one another, and if we really want them, we must have close working relationships between home and school. We must be sure that no parent, no teacher and certainly no child will be alone in the career of living.

Dag Hammarskjold has said: "What makes loneliness an anguish is not that I have no one to share my burden, but this: I have only my own burden to bear," and perhaps that is what the joint effort should be all about.

In today's world, it seems to me that we need, and must develop, good child advocates, and good supportive systems for the profession of parenting. In no job are adults who are untrained permitted to work without understanding both the job and the population served by the job, and so, in parenting, individuals must understand the nature and development of the child, and the process of interaction with the child we call "parenting." For too long parents have been blamed for the ills of society without being given the support of education for their jobs and rewarded for the positive aspects of it. We must learn new ways to teach about the importance of the effects of children on the marriage and find ways to openly be supportive to parents. There was a recent cartoon in which a mother who is reading a book on parenting is saying to the father, "What gets me is the way these books for parents always stick up for the child" -- parents feel undermined, belittled and blamed, and rarely helped.

Family life and parenting would be greatly improved if we taught what we know about child development to all individuals, for this is not a field lacking in knowledge and information, as so many counselors would have us blieve. The usual cop-out answer that "we really don't know too much about children, and anyway, it depends on the individual child and his situation" may have some truth in it, but in reality, we know a good bit about the ways

in which children grow and develop, what the danger signals for problem-growth are, and what guidance should be compatible with various stages and ages of development. Lack of the transmission of such knowledge makes for a great many problems in family life, just as lack of understanding of the stages of development of the adults in the family makes for trouble if children do not understand them as they grow.

A further priority is our need to help families know how to utilize the wealth of material on the newsstands, in libraries, in newspapers and magazines on child-rearing. Only those that are based on sound child development principles should be suggested to them. Otherwise parents get into trouble trying to carry out words and techniques that do not fit their families, and almost never does a child say back to a parent what the book says he will say!

In my own teaching I used anything that can be considered educational to help "bona-fy" parent education. The so-called experts, observations (a day at the Indianapolis airport provides excellent parent education), journals and research are "musts," but I don't eliminate one of the best popular educators I know -- Irma Bombeck! I use plays, projects, music (the Fantastiks -- Gigi -- Carousel), anything that helps the student see parent education as "in" -- as "viable" -- to use today's "in" terms -- as necessary and important -- and mainly as exciting. This latter can't be underestimated. I have made child development dull or I have seasoned it with all the excitement of the human organism in a lecture I call "The Urge to Grow." It makes a difference in the end "parenting results," I believe.

Education for parenthood should be seem primarily as preventive education, and it can be carried out by a variety of community agents in a variety of ways.

We must learn to teach from 13-A the standpoint of emotional health and success rather than failure and illness. In this area, I believe new attention to physical health is warranted. We might ask how much does a marriage and parenting need communication, marriage enrichment, and how much do the individuals need protein and nutritional enrichment?

We might also at least give equal time and attention to factors other than communication skills, and think concretely about how to teach good use of time and energy; without them, all the love, patience and compassion in the world aren't worth much.

Above all, we need to teach parents to avoid bandwagons, to discard the bastard and illegitimate attempts to undermine their quest for good education, and to make authentic, bonafide choices.

In a recent edition of Children Today, Ed Kittrell, in an article entitled "In Defense of Children," expressed these remarks I would like to use in closing.

"It has been observed before that ours is an "I"-dominated culture. Our intellectual ideal is freedom, expressed in solitary terms. Because this is a random, often chaotic world, we strive to control our own destinies through withdrawal and isolation. If we can hang onto ourselves and our personal freedom, the thinking goes, the clamor outside can be reduced to background noise. And, in the adult world, this strategy can be met with success.

"But the demands of a family and children can shatter these defenses. Any honest, sensitive parent will admit that children have a way of backing us into emotional corners. They confront us daily with what is good and bad in ourselves. They demand attention and real affection.

"Children, in short, offer us a constant dose of reality, the very thing our intellectual idea of fulfillment teaches us to avoid. Both the popular philosophers and the television advertisers imply that happiness demands devotion to the self, a preoccupation with private concerns. We are encouraged to remain, in effect, perpetual teenagers. Dealing with children, on the other hand, requires that we take a chance and first grow up ourselves. This intellectual tug-of-war accounts for the brutal irony that in a society which so worships the appearance, the illusion of youth, children themselves are accorded so little value."

Unless that value system is altered, children will continue to be neglected, or provided for as a cultural afterthought. It doesn't have to be that way. In fact, the United States is now the only "modern" nation which does not insure health care, or support a nationwide system of child care services for every family with young children. The fact that we do not may say more about our sense of decency as a people and our inability to stop being children ourselves than we may care to acknowledge.

As a society, we keep squandering that chance in useless gestures, like the father who buys a baseball for his son and then doesn't have time to play catch. If we continue to wait until the time is convenient for us to provide every individual with parent education, it may be too late.

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